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Crossing boundaries: Africans in South Asia

This paper is about musical traditions that were brought to South Asia by Africans. I will argue that African slaves who could not take their belongings with them were able to hold on to their musical traditions. Although free and forced migration of Africans occurred simultaneously, and ancient trade interactions between Asia and Africa have continued for several centuries, the focus is on Africans who were forcefully transported to Asia (de Silva Jayasuriya 2008a). The transmission of Southeast Asian cultural traits to East Africa since about 900 AD through trading networks in the Indian Ocean has long been known. On the other hand, African cultural influences in Asia are barely recognised due to the low profile of African migrants. Given that the first generation migrants came to South Asian countries several centuries ago and the lack of historical documentation, we cannot, now, build a complete picture about their past.

While Muslim India attracted the first tranche of Africans, the second arrived due to European trade expansions around the Indian Ocean. Given the strategic importance of the Makran coast in Balochistan, which was on the trade route to and from Africa, Arabia, Central Asia and South Asia, it is not surprising that African slaves also travelled on this route. To the Maldives, Africans were taken on Arab *dhow*s or were brought by Sultans returning from their pilgrimage to Mecca. In neighbouring Sri Lanka, Africans were brought by the Europeans – Portuguese, Dutch and British – who dominated parts or whole of the island for 450 years. One might expect to find a pattern for African migration but until we research the other countries in South Asia, we cannot make any judgements.

Slaves were treated as a commodity, bought and sold in markets located on the trade route. They were stripped of all their possessions and they had no property, no homeland and no human rights. Yet what nobody could take away from them was their talents in music and dance. They were able to reproduce the music in their new environments using make-shift instruments. Spontaneous dancing accompanied their music. These traditions were passed down through generations of Afro-Asians without being recorded.

Over time African slaves were converted and absorbed into Islamic societies by intermarriage. Their status thus changed from that of outsiders to insiders and they were able to establish new kinship networks. Traits of African cultural heritage were mainly preserved in musical traditions. These mu-

sical traditions have to be analysed by taking into account any pointers to their African roots such as lyrics, dance forms, and linguistic elements.

Africans were to be found along all the major ocean routes – the Pacific, the Indian and the Atlantic Oceans. They were sailors, soldiers, interpreters, concubines, eunuchs, divers, entertainers, and workers in dockyards, plantations and salt marshes. In 1622, African slaves defended the Portuguese base in Macau. The Dutch attacked with a force of 13 ships and 1300 men. The Portuguese only had 50 trained musketeers and 100 residents, many of whom were *mestiços*, on their side. They were aided by Jesuit artillerymen and about 50 to 100 slaves, who were given arms for defence. The Dutch, quite surprisingly, suffered a bad defeat with the loss of many men and high-ranking officials. The Portuguese only lost 6 lives and 26 were wounded. The Dutch Commander, Jan Pieterzoon Coen, underwent a learning experience at this battle. He advised the Dutch authorities that slaves should be used as soldiers instead of Dutch troops. He noted that it was the Portuguese slaves, *Kaffirs* and others, who beat the Dutch (Boxer 1968: 85). In Macau, Africans deserted the Portuguese and defected to the Chinese.

In 16th century Japan, Africans taken to Nagasaki were depicted on *Nanban byōbu* (Japanese screen paintings) carrying parasols or working on the *caravels*. Africans adapted to the Portuguese culture, not only in terms of language and religion but also in clothing as is witnessed on the *Nanban byōbu* paintings. Through pidgin and creole languages which evolved in these heterogeneous environments, Africans could directly communicate with others. Africans were converted to Christianity and Islam. Many were given new names, making it difficult to trace their lineage and identity. Others have assimilated by culturally conforming to the host country.

However, given their forced migration and their low profile and socioeconomic status, most Afro-Asians lived and still live on the periphery of societies. Generally their presence is hidden, either because they merge into cosmopolitan urban areas or are in remote villages, or are indistinguishable from other Asians as a result of out-marriage. Nevertheless, people of African origin have not only been able to retain their musical traditions but also pass them on to others through hybridised forms. Through music they have been able to cross boundaries and make their presence felt although new hybrid forms that evolve are often taken to be indigenous.

The presence of Afro-Asians has not been given due recognition. Owing to the lack of documentation and the centuries that have elapsed since Africans first migrated to Asia, there are gaps which we cannot fill. Historical reconstruction of forced African migration to Asia, therefore, poses methodological problems. Due to the long distances involved and enforced remigration, these traditions may not necessarily be African. A period of acculturation in other Asian societies may have transformed African music before Africans reached their final destination as evidenced today. A study of the musical traditions that have

been maintained provides an alternative method of viewing the African movement to Asia. There may also be links through musical instruments and rituals such as spirit possession ceremonies. The histories, philosophies and cultures of South Asia are varied and in what follows, I will consider a few examples from that region to illustrate how Africans were able to make their presence felt in Asia despite marginalisation or acculturation.

African Cultural Flows to India and Pakistan

In the 1st century account by the Roman writer Pliny, there is historical evidence that an 'Ethiopian' town existed around 77 AD in what is today called Bharuch (Broach), Gujarat State (Wink 1990). There is evidence that Greek and Roman artefacts found their way to Gujarat and Sindh, western India, during the Kshatrappa period (20 BC to 217 AD). There has been considerable evidence of Roman and Byzantine maritime commerce with Ethiopia, in particular. This may have caused a triangular movement of peoples between Europe, Africa and India. If archaeological evidence were available from Bharuch, this hypothesis could be substantiated.

At the end of the 10th century, several Africans came as slave-soldiers to northern India, following the spread of Islam in that area. The Afro-Gujaratis consider themselves talented singers as they know that Africans were selected for their ability to sing. Bilal, a freed African slave had been selected by Prophet Muhammed to be the first reciter of *azan* (the call to prayer). Amy Catlin (2006), an American ethnomusicologist, discussed the theatrical performances of the Afro-Gujaratis before bringing their sacred music to the world stage. They had wanted to increase their earnings, while still maintaining their traditional role as *faqirs* (religious mendicants). They also wished to expand their horizons and share their Sufi joy with others. They consider their performances as an extension of their religious activities because they sing sacred texts.

Sidi Goma, a group of Afro-Gujarati musicians, have performed in Europe, America, Asia and Africa since October 2002, playing sacred music and dancing and singing to their ancestral Saint, Bava Gor, who is believed to have been an Abyssinian. They perform *dhamal* (Gujarati), which they call *goma*, a word whose etymon is the Swahili word *ngoma*, which means 'drum' and also 'dance'. In the past, Afro-Indian servants performed *ngoma* dances to music played on drums, rattles and shells on special occasions such as birthdays and weddings in the noble courts (Basu 1993).

The Afro-Gujaratis wear animal skins and headgear made of peacock feathers or other bird feathers, paint their bodies, and perform a sacred traditional dance to the rhythm of the *dhamal* (small drum), *madido* (big drum), *mugarman* (footed-drum), *mai mishra* (coconut rattle), *nafir* (conch trumpet),

malunga (musical bow) and other musical instruments. The most significant African retention is the *malunga*, a braced musical bow; it is found in many communities in Africa and in African diasporas. What begins on a religious note ends as a communal dance, with the audience, largely non-African, also dancing with the artists on the stage. Off the stage, events such as *urs* (the death of a Muslim Saint), celebrated over several days, provide an occasion for playing *dhamal* and dancing.

Music seems to be the main cultural retention among people of African descent in Andhra Pradesh, India, where they are called *Chaush* (a term which derives from Ottoman military nomenclature) or Sidi (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006a). Their drum bands, which beat African drums, are hired to play music and to dance in 'African ways' on special occasions such as weddings. Fathers and grandfathers of today's *Chaush* had come to Hyderabad to form a bodyguard to the former Nizam. In 1724, the Asafiya dynasty (Nizams) of Hyderabad maintained a royal guard of African slave-soldiers who entertained their masters with African songs and dances. They had learnt songs which are sung in a Bantu language in Tanzania, during spirit possession rituals in order to effect healing. When a team of American historians and anthropologists visited Andhra Pradesh some years ago, a *Chaush* in his fifties sang a song that he had learnt from his grandfather, though he did not understand the words, and danced. The lyrics were in Shambaa, a Bantu language spoken in north-eastern Tanzania. The song was still sung commonly during the first moments of the rituals that were performed to effect healing (Alpers 2003). African retentions also remain in the Swahili words of the lyrics. Ababu Minda (2007), an anthropologist, notes that the *Chaush* in Hyderabad are invited to social occasions, to play their traditional music to the Christian Afro-Indians in the area. Their music groups are called *Daff* Parties. The *Daff* is a round single-headed frame drum associated with Islamic culture. It is used in folk music, art music, dance music and Sufi rituals. In Africa, the *Daff* is also played by the Swahili and Swahili/Nguja people, in Dar-es-Salaam and Tabora, Tanzania. It is worthwhile investigating whether the *Daff* reflects something more than a connection with Muslim culture, as it may possibly reveal the roots of the *Chaush*. Further research is needed to investigate this link.

Africans in Karnataka play the *gumat*, a drum which is also played by Goan musicians in India and its diaspora when performing their folk songs. There were many African slaves in Goa but it appears that after the abolition of slavery in Portuguese India, freedmen abandoned Goa for the Western Ghats or assimilated into Goan society through intermarriage. The *gumat* is a clay pot with iguana skin. Popular folk songs of the Africans – *Balo*, *Leva*, *Bandugia* – are replete with feelings for the community, its pride and religious fervour (Chauhan 1995). According to Gayathri Kassebaum and Peter Clause (2000), Afro-Indians who live in northern Karnataka and the border areas of Shimogga have their own social structure and musical genre. These

Afro-Asians are descendants of slaves. Today they are either Hindus, Muslims or Christians. Social dancing (*aligum kunita*) of the Muslim Afro-Indians in Karnataka is accompanied by chanting 'Ali, ali, ali' as they commemorate Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, through this dance. Any number of people perform the dance, but usually two of the dancers are dressed in the appropriate costume, – shorts, headgear made of flowers, a belt of bells. They also carry a leather belt. The bells provide the only accompaniment to the chant. The dancers often stop and hit themselves with the belt before starting to dance again as the self-inflicted pain is believed to heighten the religious experience.

In Karachi, the Mangopir festival is an annual event celebrated by the small Afro-Pakistani community. They are the disciples of the Sufi Saint Baba Mangopir. Abbas (2002), a journalist, reported on their dance, a ceremonious, systematic and powerful performance. The festival attracts all ethnic groups but it retains an African connection through the drum beats. It begins with the girls offering specially prepared food to the crocodiles that live in the pond outside the shrine. The Pakistanis do not understand the words of the songs that accompany the drum beats. According to the Afro-Pakistanis, the words are a mixture of Swahili and Baluchi.

In Pakistan, Sabir Badalkhan (2006), a folklorist, draws attention to the musical heritage of the Baloches of African origin which has been a tool for liberating oneself from the daily hardships of a discriminated and less advantageous life, and a mechanism for expressing rage and suffering in a natural way. The musical tradition of Afro-Baloches was closely related to maritime activities and seafaring. Makran-Baloch maritime contacts with the eastern and north-eastern African coasts lasted until the first half of the 20th century. One Baloch seaman, who was in his seventies, had learnt the songs and their Swahili lyrics when he was in Zanzibar and other East African ports. Another elderly Baloch sailor recalled how sailors from all parts of the Indian Ocean joined the drumming and dancing sessions when he was stationed in an African coastal town.

Badalkhan notes similarities between the *Lewa* performed in Oman and the *Laywa* in the Makran. Dieter describes the *Lewa* in Oman:

Lewa groups, consisting of men who are descendants of slaves, perform for profit. [...] several drums, including African-type drums called *musundu*; conch trumpets (*jīm*), and metal trays of canisters are used to beat the time line. [...] Altogether twenty to forty people who make up the group. [...] Dancers and singers revolve while circling around the instrumentalists. The song texts, in poorly understood Swahili and Arabic, abound with references to East Africa and seafaring. *Lewa* carries strong African connotations that are neither Arab nor Muslim (Christensen 2002:678-679).

According to Badalkhan, the only difference between the traditions in the Oman and Makran, is that the dance in Oman leads to a trance, and in Makran it is simply a festive and merry-making dance, which does not end in a trance. Badalkhan also describes another genre of songs called *Amba*, which are work songs. The instruments played in both *Amba* and *Laywa* are the same. Both these are musical expressions that have flourished in Balochistan due to the seafaring culture of Makran and the maritime networks of the Indian Ocean.

African Flows to the Maldives and Sri Lanka

In Islamic countries where migrants have converted and assimilated, it is difficult to find distinct African communities. In the Maldives, consisting of 1,190 islands, situated southwest of Sri Lanka, however, many descendants of Africans have remained isolated on small islands. The islands are geologically organised in clusters called Atolls which, for administrative convenience, are divided into groups. The Maldives offers an opportunity to explore important aspects of the contribution of Africans to contemporary South Asian culture. The Maldivians converted to Islam in 1153. Prior to that they had been Buddhists and there are inscriptions of Buddhist *mantras* (chants) on coral stone at least from the 9th century onwards.

We know from the 14th century records of Ibn Batuta, the Moroccan traveller, that there were African connections by that time. Batuta visited the *Habshigefanu* shrine of an African saint in the Maldives. This establishes that Africans were called *Habshi* in the Maldives at that time. The Maldives was a stopover point for Arab *dhow*s sailing to the Far East. After conversion to Islam, these commercial ties were reinforced by religious and spiritual bonds which have made impressions on the language and other cultural aspects of the Maldivians. African slaves were brought to the Maldives on *dhow*s until about the mid-19th century. Africans were also brought back by Sultans returning from the *Hajj*. These Africans intermarried with the indigenous Maldivians. Most Africans worked as *raveris* or coconut plantation keepers, which suggests that there may have been a shortage of labour. In 1834, two British naval lieutenants who visited Male reported that

‘From the information we were able to collect – it appears that Muscat vessels do not often visit this place: when they do, they generally bring a cargo of slaves. Five years ago, one came and sold about twenty-five lads, at an average price of about 80 rupees each’ (Forbes & Ali 1980:19).

In the Maldives, I interviewed the descendants of an African slave, Sangoaru. A Maldivian Sultan who went to Mecca for the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to the Holy sites), brought back five slaves: Sangoaru, Laalu, Marjan, Masud and Muizz. Today Sangoaru’s descendants are well integrated into the Maldivian socio-

political structure. They are making a significant contribution to the economy and welfare of the Maldives.

Naseema Mohammed (2006:40) remarks that the freed African slaves introduced the sound of the African drums to the Maldives. A popular form of music called *Bodu Beru* ('big drum') is believed to have originated from East Africa. The drums are two and a half feet long and made out of breadfruit or coconut wood with a goatskin membrane on each end. Traditional *Bodu Beru* is played by the descendants of Africans, who mostly live in Feridu, an island in Ari Atoll. It is also played on other islands in the same Atoll and also on Felidhoo island, in the Vaavu Atoll. Traditionally, this was an all male performance and the troupe includes three drummers, a lead singer and a chorus of ten to fifteen men. The authentic *Bodu Beru* was accompanied by *Baburu Lava* ('African Song') and *Baburu Nisun* ('African Dance'); Africa is called *Baburu Kara*. Most Maldivians do not understand the meaning of the songs. The themes of *Baburu Lava* could be love, religion, enjoyment, courage or praise of the Sultan. The songs begin slowly increasing in tempo and a few members of the group begin to dance. The music seems to be akin to that of Zanzibar and Oman, and investigating the links in musical traditions could also reveal the routes that the slaves took. By 1840, Zanzibar was the centre of Omani operations and these political reinforcements would have helped to establish the musical connections. Today *Bodu Beru* is also a form of entertainment. It has become commercialised today and is a tourist attraction.

In neighbouring Sri Lanka, historical evidence suggests that Ethiopians were trading in the 6th century when the island was an emporium in the Indian Ocean. Ibn Batuta, who visited the Island in the 14th century, noted that a garrison of 500 Abyssinians served the ruler of Colombo. Sri Lanka did not come under Muslim rule, however, but Arabs were traders. Afro-Sri Lankans today trace their roots back to the colonial period (1505-1948), when the Portuguese, Dutch and British brought African slaves to the Island (de Silva Jayasuriya 2003, 2006b, 2008b). I have taken into account the oral traditions of the Afro-Sri Lankans, retrieving their memories which bring to light important clues about their roots (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006c). Their African ancestry is signalled through a combination of music and song known as *Manhas*, and spontaneous un-choreographed dancing. There are only a limited number of *Manhas* as the largest community in Puttalama, Northwestern Province, is not composing new songs any more. They say that they are not able to compose songs because they do not know the language of the lyrics. The elders speak Indo-Portuguese of Ceylon. It was their mother-tongue but due to changes in socio-politics, the younger generations speak Sinhala. Some words in the lyrics have Portuguese etyma whilst others are borrowings from languages that they have had contact with during their transportation to, and also in, Sri Lanka. In most African countries, oral literature and music are linked. Songs are often integrated into story-telling (Sadie 2001:205).

Manhas are not recorded but the community can recall the verses. A song that the Afro-Sri Lankans in a village called Sirambiyadiya (North-Western province) sang to me, refers to the beautiful Arab women around them. Another refers to Saint Anthony and encapsulates their devotion to Catholicism.

While *Manhas* are limited to the Afro-Sri Lankans, *Kaffrinhas* are a better known genre. The etyma of *Kaffrinha* is Portuguese (*Cafre* from the Arabic word *qafir* meaning 'non-believer' and the Portuguese diminutive *nha*). There are 19th century recordings of *Kaffrinhas* on a manuscript in the British Library, London. The lyrics are in the Indo-Portuguese of Ceylon but unfortunately, there are no scores available (de Silva Jayasuriya 2001). *Kaffrinha* is also a form of dance. It was also appropriated by the Europeans who colonized Sri Lanka and by the Island's anglicised, indigenous, elite. Africans were musicians in regimental bands during the British era. They also served Sri Lankan kings as trumpeters and drummers.

Moreover, *Kaffrinha* has had an enduring effect on *Baila*, the most popular genre of music, in postcolonial Sri Lanka (de Silva Jayasuriya 2008c). The word *Baila* has its etymon in Portuguese and means 'dance' but it has become associated with the music and songs that accompany dance. What is called *Baila* in Sri Lanka today is a postcolonial composition influenced by the Portuguese ballads and *Kaffrinha*. *Baila* cassettes and compact discs have the highest number of cassette and compact disc sales of any type of music in Sri Lanka. The 'catchy rhythms' – syncopations and cross-rhythms – have contributed to their popularity.

Concluding Remarks

Afro-Asian music can be associated with religious practices or simply be forms of entertainment or means of expressing collective identity. There are similarities in the musical legacies of the Afro-Asians in India, Pakistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. Connections are apparent in the names of these genres – Makrani *Laywa* and Maldivian *lava*. Their links to the Middle East or Gulf States would enable us to trace the slave routes. For other South Asian genres – *Baburu Lava*, *Baila*, *Bodu Beru*, *Daff*, *Goma*, *Kaffrinha*, *Manha* – comparative ethnomusicological studies could reveal if and how they were related. This may, then, point towards their African roots.

Clearly, more ethnomusicological and linguistic research needs to be undertaken in the Maldives, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Further fieldwork and research should reveal hitherto unrecognised African musical traditions in other SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Corporation) countries. Once we begin to analyse the structure of the music, it would be possible to appreciate the African influence in hybridised forms of music. In addition to musicological comparison of *Baburu Lava*, *Manha*, *Laywa*, *Lewa* and

Dhamal, analysis of the lyrics of songs to find Swahili or other African words would be an area for future work.

Studying the instruments played by Afro-Asians might reveal the paths that they took to Asia, the cultures that they were exposed to on their way to their final destinations. We also need to detail the musical form of the genres. Some genres are linked to socio-religious activities while others have become forms of entertainment. They are vehicles for Afro-Asians to express an African identity and a reservoir of cultural memory.

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